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‘The people wore no armour, or none that I recognized’: How perspective contributes to the exploration of dis/embodiment in Ta-Nahisi Coates’s ‘Between the World and Me’

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Abstract:

Considering the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2015), the text considers the conditions of working from a place of acknowledged subjectivity. In doing so, Coates demonstrates that any notion of working from a ‘universal’ position is a literary fantasy from which writers of colour have been excluded. Coates deploys complex facets of dis/embodiment to evoke the experience of moving through the world in his particular body, while presenting the structural and systemic conditions that preface, and often, obstruct, that movement.

Keywords: memoir, life writing, embodiment, epistolary, perspective, first person, subjectivity

Ta-Nahisi Coates has made interrogating what it means to ‘live free in a black body’ the question of his life.¹ In his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*, the act of asking this question is described as a necessity that has girded the writer ‘against the sheer terror of disembodiment’ (2015: 12). In this essay, I will consider how Coates’s use of perspective, and the careful deployment of writing around embodiment or the threat of disembodiment, invokes the imperative nature of his task.

Aided by a strong lyric impulse, *Between the World and Me* explores the experience of moving through the world in the writer’s particular body, while presenting the structural and systemic conditions that preface, and often, obstruct, that movement. Rather than simply staking claim to the body as the self, or conversely, mind/body dualism, Coates argues for the necessity of contextualisation in the relationship between the material facts of our being, and ways of knowing. In his writing, we find embodiment as personal necessity, and as a radical counter to literary expectation, carefully expressed through the second person.

The first word of *Between the World and Me* is not ‘I’ but ‘Son’. A line break follows the mode of address, the epistolary form encoded in the shape of the text. Coates then launches straight into an anecdote illustrating the casual regularity with which he is forced to face the prospect of disembodiment: ‘Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body’ (5). But the narrative, summoning a diaristic immediacy with its reference to the preceding weekend, quickly stretches back into ratified history. Abraham Lincoln is quoted and Coates notes that in 1863, America ‘had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world’ (6). The immediate return to the second person is thus a sharp shock, as Coates warns his son not to take comfort in this fact, for when Lincoln said ‘government by the people’,

he 'did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me' (6).

The second-person perspective is employed with care throughout the text and Coates is mindful not to let it wear thin. This ensures that each time the word 'Son' and later, his name, 'Samori', appears, the language is injected with both urgency and tenderness – these words are not really meant for you or for me, they are intended as a manual, a poetic manual, but a manual nonetheless, necessary for Samori's survival in a country whose 'entire narrative [...] argues against the truth of who you are' (99). Despite being prompted by a desire to guide fifteen-year-old Samori, the story is Coates's own and, as we shall see, it is also critical for his survival.

While Coates keeps us close, the second person also induces a subtle othering that serves what Vivian Gornick would describe as Coates's 'the story'.² McKenzie Wark identified this process in the context of trans life writing, numerous recent examples of which – including Akwaeke Emezi's *Dear Senthurán* (2021), Kay Gabriel's *A Queen in Buck's County* (2022) and Wark's memoir *Love and Money: Sex and Death* (2023) – use the second person because it, 'turns the writerly self away from the self towards the other'. This is helpful for confronting readers 'used to perceiving trans-ness through the cis gaze which categorizes us as objects to be discounted, distrusted, spoken of or for'.³ To take another example, in Carmen Maria Machado's fragmented memoir, *In the Dream House* (2019), the narrator addresses her younger, abused self in the second person. Claudia Rankine's lyric essay *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), meanwhile, also makes use of the second person, to powerful effect. These writers ask, alongside Coates, what does it *feel* like to live in an othered body.

Key to this essay's thesis is the repost Coates offers to the idea of a 'universal' literary voice. Rankine harnesses the subjectivity of the indefinite article in the

subtitle of *Citizen: An American Lyric* (my underline) – to make an express point. Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2022) does this as well. The indefinite article expresses that, while these writers are considering the conditions of living in a racist society, neither is attempting to speak for a vast, diverse group that has historically been treated monolithically, dehumanised and anonymised.

Coates's title, meanwhile, is taken from a 1935 Richard Wright poem that tells of stumbling upon the human remains of a lynching. The words nod to the space the book occupies, between polemic (*the World*) and lyric (*Me*). Through this between-space we hear the defining facts of Coates's life: his brutal Baltimore youth, his intellectual awakening, his friend Prince Jones's savage murder at the hands of the Maryland police in 2000, and his hopes for Samori's future. The title suggests a conversation but also, a 'breach' (115) between the writer's body – or the perceived 'condition of my body' (6) – and the American 'Dream'. A balance of proximity and distance is an essential tool for Coates.

Some of the critical reception to *Between the World and Me* illustrates the potential difficulties of embodied writing, and more broadly, working from the self. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Matthew Shenonda opined that the 'epistolary memoir' gave Coates space to engage in 'sentimentality, conjecture, feeling, confusion, and contradiction'. This is, Shenonda concludes, tricky, 'freeing' but also 'messy'. Arguably it is unwise to choose personal narrative over more scholarly forms given Coates's subject matter, and he 'could have done more to help readers – and his son – make sense of' events such as Prince Jones's murder, through deeper, analytical contextualisation of racism in America. Importantly, Shenonda does frame this argument in response to the discourse surrounding the book as much as to the book itself – it becomes a 'public text' because many previously silent on racism chose to engage with it at the

time of its publication.⁴ But in suggesting Coates could have distanced himself from his material, filled in more gaps, Shenonda's position perhaps speaks to an anxiety over the pigeonholing of work by marginalised writers as intrinsically 'personal'. As academic Lauren Fournier states, 'It has been writers of colour, queer/trans writers, and women writers who have come up against charges of solipsism and narcissism.' These writers, Fournier argues, 'have been historically overdetermined by limiting conceptions of the "personal", as if their work is inherently subjective and embodied.'⁵

At the other end of this spectrum is what Sandeep Parmar describes in the context of lyric poetry as an 'inherent premise of universality', which is unfailingly 'coded by whiteness'.⁶ Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda think through the fallacy of universality in terms of opposing positions: transcendence and addressability: while white writers can assume that transcendence 'is a given', for many writers of colour, it is rendered out of reach, because they so often 'begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed'.⁷

If literature's universal position is canonically taken to be white, Coates arguably reclaims the personal, embodied narrative as a perspective with radical potential. Instead of ascribing to a literary convention that has traditionally excluded him, he takes the immediacy of embodied life as his subject. This subject coexists inextricably with the brute fact of systemic racism: 'In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to live' (12). The text's disinterest in objectivity, despite its page-by-page cataloguing of indubitable injustices, results in a powerful evocation of a life haunted by violence, attrition and fear, as well as one capable of extreme love and beauty.

A passage in Part II of *Between* illustrates Coates's skilful use of embodiment. Samori is invited to bear witness to Coates's first trip to Paris, a place that was once as foreign as Jupiter (117) to

him. Checking into his hotel in the 6th arrondissement, the narrator ventures into the streets:

I did not think much about Baldwin or Wright. I had not read Sartre nor Camus, and if I walked past Café de Flore or Les Deux Magots I did not, then, take any particular note. None of that mattered. It was Friday, and what mattered were the streets thronged with people in amazing configurations. Teenagers together in cafés. Schoolchildren kicking a soccer ball on the street, backpacks to the side. Older couples in long coats, billowing scarves, and blazers. Twentysomethings leaning out of any number of establishments looking beautiful and cool. It recalled New York, but without the low-grade, ever-present fear. The people wore no armour, or none that I recognized (122-123).

We are presented with a tentative utopia. Coates acknowledges Baldwin and Wright, but does not 'think much' about them, lightly quashing the inevitability of a comparison predicated on race.⁸ Deftly, and without irony, he proceeds to cast aside the city's white (or 'those who believe they are white', 42) literary giants and historic cafés in favour of the immediately experiential: the magic of living, breathing people at ease with themselves. The Parisians appear through a series of tableaux, clear-cut and refined. Even the crowds are rendered painterly in their 'amazing configurations'. All ages are out, exhibiting, to the narrator's practiced eye, an openness that can only result from living without constant fear. An openness that, with their blazers and bar-hopping, smacks not only of foreignness, but of wealth.

Each of Coates's words in this slim volume is weighed and measured. The breathlessness of the language here, the incompleteness of sentences such as 'teenagers together in cafés', implies the speed with which he takes in the scenes. This observational distance contrasts with the embodied 'ever-present fear' of walking the streets of New York. That that fear is felt in the chest, the area of the body most vulnerable to attack, is

implied by the reference to 'armour'. (Coates often refers to emotions in sensory terms – 'my eyes were blindfolded by fear', 126). In Paris, the narrator feels less visible, and consequently, he becomes as assured as the children who have left their backpacks unattended to play. His body is free to melt into the city, like the gorgeously idiomatic 'butter in the stew' (123).

The reader breathes a short sigh of relief. Oh, how we want this for our narrator, who, for one of the few times in the book can forget the perpetual danger his life is in. More than that, the fresh context and feeling of safety makes space for a realisation that nudges towards transcendence: 'For the first time I knew not only that I really was alive, that I really was studying and observing, but that I had long been alive' (122). He continues with his evening, eating a 'magnificent' steak and engaging playfully with a waitress who presents no disdain for his 'catastrophic' French (123).

In his *LARB* essay, Shenonda described Coates's treatment of Paris as 'naïve', and yet, Coates arguably submits to this knowingly. We find him falling in love, experiencing the rose-tinted bliss of liberation from the daily violence of America. Whatever the reader's circumstance, we surely recognise the experience of being far away, somewhere beautiful, and feeling the mind and senses momentarily transcend the worries of life back home. His observations are impressionable and, despite appearances, deeply subjective. To quote Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart: 'Encounters are not events of knowing, units of anything, revelations of realness, or facts'.⁹ The city's unqualified conviviality sets the scene for what is to come, which is prefaced by Coates's qualification regarding the lack of visible armour: 'or none that I recognised'; he is on foreign land, and he knows his distance is perhaps too great.

The next day, we follow him to Le Jardin du Luxembourg where his surroundings, after the previous day's

revery, prompts an intense, strange loneliness:

Perhaps it was that I had never sat in a public garden before, had not even known it to be something that I'd want to do. [...] But sitting in that garden, for the first time I was an alien, I was a sailor-landless and disconnected. And I was sorry that I had never felt this particular loneliness before [...] Now I felt the deeper weight of my generational chains – my body confined, by history and policy, to certain zones (124).

Sat in this historic garden, Coates's perspective remains embodied, for he does not have the privilege of absconding entirely from his physicality, or the conditions of his birth, the fiction of his race. The sentences build in a ballad-like lament: 'had not even known it to be something that I'd want to do'; 'a sailor-landless'. His loneliness is all the greater for its shock appearance amidst all this pleasure, and for his regret at not having experienced it before. As with his feelings of wandering through Paris's

Ta-Nahisi Coates's 'Between the World and Me'

streets, this 'particular loneliness' momentarily punctures the pressure that has accumulated as Coates describes, with unrelenting passion, the terror that grips him at the thought of his child going out in the world: 'Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me' (82). But the relief is temporary, the distance invoked only adds to the weight of Coates's 'generational chains' when they inevitably close in around his body. Those chains represent the violence and othering, arguably what Rankine and Loffreda refer to in literary terms as 'addressability',¹⁰ that he and his son remain subject to, as were his parents and their parents. Our focus remains on Coates, but we recognise that the chains speak to millions of bodies shackled over a 250-year-period, described earlier in the book as 'whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains' (70), as well as the writer's family.

Finally, Coates switches back to the second person to debunk the Parisian dream for Samori, who would shortly visit with his parents. To do this, he refers him back to his body and the bodies of his kin, urging him, through anaphora, to remember:

We will always be black, you and I, even if it means different things in different places. [...] Remember that you and I are [...] the children of trans-Atlantic rape. [...] Remember the Roma you saw begging with their children in the street, and the venom with which they were addressed. Remember the Algerian cab driver, speaking openly of his hatred of Paris... (127-128).

The core of the story is necessarily and resiliently embodied. The writer is so used to questioning the impact his body has on his safety, and his ability to care for his son, that he constantly battles the 'sheer terror of disembodiment' (12).

Rather than naivety, Coates's experiences in Paris over a period of a few months powerfully expresses a complex facet of racialised alienation – a desire to separate from, or transcend, one's body, while recognising that awareness of it is what guarantees survival. In a very tangible sense, Coates takes subjectivity as his subject and dis/embodiment as his medium.

This is a writer aware of the fact that, any notion of working from a 'universal' position is a fantasy from which writers of colour are excluded. *Between the World and Me* rejects claims to universality contingent on a birds-eye, transcendent view of the world, and assumes instead an embodied position capable of inspiring similarly bodily feelings of guttural rage, tenderness and fortitude. What these moments reveal, as does Coates's journey through Paris, is the ever-shifting relationality of the self. This work is as unfinished and changing as the body.

Note

This article is shorter than might be typical; its length is the result of the application of

decolonising principles by the author, which the editors welcomed. The first draft considered Coates's book alongside another text thinking through aspects of dis/embodiment. On reflection, this pairing set up a false equivalence, given that only Coates was working from the position of a racialised other.

BIOGRAPHY

Amie Corry is a writer and editor based in London. She works mainly in visual art, writing criticism for titles such as *Art Monthly* and the *Times Literary Supplement* and editing for publishers including Tate, MACK and Phaidon. Amie is Chair of the art and mental health charity Hospital Rooms. In 2013, Amie co-produced a London-wide audit of gender equality in the art sector, and in 2019, she co-founded the books and ideas festival *Primadonna* alongside sixteen other writers and publishing professionals. The festival aims to redress the make-up of traditional book festivals, giving prominence to women, people of colour, LGBTQI+, working class people and disabled people. She has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, London and is represented by Nicola Chang at David Highams.

Footnotes

1. Coates, T-N. (2015), *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau), 12
2. Gornick, V. (2002) *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 13. Gornick writes: 'The situation is the context or circumstance [...], the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.'
3. Wark, M. (November 2023), 'Critical (Auto) Theory', *e-flux* 140
4. Shenonda, M. (13 September 2015), 'Reading *Between the World and Me* in Context', *Los Angeles Review of Books*.
5. Berggren, R. (6 August 2021), 'Writing the Self, Communally: An Interview with

Lauren Fournier', *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*

6. Parma, S. (2020), 'Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12 (1)

7. Rankine, C. and Loffreda, B. (9 April 2015), 'On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary', *Lithub*

8. Though James Baldwin's claim that France offered him 'the lucidity of distance' is arguably pertinent.

9. Berlant, L., & Stewart, K. (2019), *The Hundreds* (Durham: Duke University Press), 5

10. Rankine and Loffreda argue that the writer of colour may wish to operate inside, 'literary institutions that expect and even reward certain predictable performances of race. [...] But even if it conforms, the performance returns the writer of colour to an addressability that at any moment may become violent' ('On Whiteness...', 2015).

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